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ABSTRACT

This examination of education in late antiquity looks at the variable definitions of literacy, the function of elite literacy as a scarce and highly valued commodity, and the nature of the relationship between the cultural elite and Christianity. A basic definition of a literate person is one who can read and write in his or her society's standard language but, in fact, various classes of literacy existed in antiquity, and literacy held a high place in the competition for esteem among the elite. Schools of grammar and rhetoric were exclusive in their social organization; there was no single system of primary and secondary schools, but different types of schools that served different population groups. Massive illiteracy existed among the public at large and the "Schools of Letters," which served this population and supposedly provided basic literacy, ranked low in prestige. The elite or "Liberal Schools," insulated those who had access to them from the lower orders; their teachers received both higher fees and wider legal privileges than did others. Prior to the third century, Christians claimed that the culture of the "letterati" was symbolic of false values and showed no care for inner truth. However, after the fourth century, the opening up of the Christian community in the East meant that the literary culture came to be regarded as less of a divisive force; the Western church, on the other hand, still saw itself as an alien body in a dangerous environment. (NL)

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Some Consequences of Limited Literacy in Late Antiquity

by
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Some Consequences of Limited Literacy in Late Antiquity

Many of the great cultural achievements of the Roman empire had literacy as their precondition: the "bookish" poetry of Vergil, so unlike the oral poetry of Homer; the codification of law that laid the foundation for the Western legal tradition; and of course the governance of the immense empire itself. Yet these achievements were set amid a population that was itself very largely illiterate. The consequences of this pervasive illiteracy--for daily life, for social relations, for political adiministration--have only begun to receive systematic study; in this paper I want to draw your attention briefly to three related topics that presented themselves when I was preparing my recent study of education in late antiquity. The first concerns the variable definitions of literacy itself. The second concerns the function of elite literacy as a scarce and highly valued commodity, especially in its role as an index of social status. The third concerns the relations between the cultural elite and Christianity, and the different tenor of these relations in the eastern and western halves of the empire.

Despite the tendency of modern states to standardize education on a scale unknown in antiquity, our notion of literacy is still fluid. The literate person, in the most basic sense of the term, can read and write his society's standard language (in societies that recognize a standard language) with a competence sufficient for the ordinary transactions of daily life. But university teachers in the United States today can be heard to complain of their students lack of "literacy," by which they might mean anything from a gross deficiency in basic skills to an inability to read and write with far more than minimal sophistication. And a person seeking a university teaching position will score a point if he or she can be said to be literate, that is, broadly conver-

sant with the higher literary culture or, simply, cultured. Having so many possible applications of the term is a symptom of situational literacy: the meaning and connotation of "literacy" depends on such variables as geographic or social context and the user's view of his own literacy.

Not surprisingly, similar fluidity is visible in antiquity. At one extreme were the illiterates who appear in the contracts, deeds, and loans known from Egypt and elsewhere, the men and women described as "those who do not know letters" (γράμματα μὴ εἰδότες, litteras nescientes): the word "letters" in this case refers to basic skills in reading and writing Greek or Latin, and the phrases are purely descriptive, registering a fact of life that involves no crippling disadvantage and implies in itself no social or economic inferiority. At the other extreme is a man like St. Jerome, the recipient of an elite education--an education in grammar and rhetoric-- who reveals his own assumptions and values in the heat of polemic. Clearly, when Jerome taunts his enemy Rufinus with the charge that Rufinus and his followers "have not learned their letters," or when he calls Rufinus an "illiterate author" (συγγραφεὺς ἀγράμματος) and recommends that he go back to the grammarian's school to "learn his letters," he really means that Rufinus is deficient in literary skills more advanced than his ABCs. Equally clearly, the deficiency is thought to stand in contrast to Jerome's own skills and is understood to carry a stigma per se.

Examples can be collected and located between the two extremes. There are, for instance, those who straddled the boundary between literacy and illiteracy, those who called themselves "slow writers" or "persons of few letters" (βραδέως γράφοντες, ὀλιγογράμματοι), who could painstakingly put their names to legal documents but were otherwise illiterate, or who could read, but only if the writing were in block letters. Such persons would have thought of themselves as literate: they were clearly not "without letters" (ἀγράμματοι, illiterati), even if they could not claim much fluency; standing on the boundary of literacy, they

could behave as literate personsfor a specific purpose or under certain conditions.

Moving slightly higher up the scale of literacy, we find a woman, Aurelia Thaisous, petitioning for a legal privilege, the right to conduct business without a guardian: she asserts (falsely, as far as we know) that the laws give this privilege "especially to women who know letters," and she describes herself as "literate (ἐγγράμματος) and able to write with the greatest of ease." Her claim of literacy is substantively fairly modest, the simple ability to write fluently. But by gilding the basic provisions of the law, she shows that she is, if not boasting of her attainment, at least aware that she possesses a distinction that would buttress her claim to privilege and provide a practical advantage once the privilege was granted.

Or again, there is the fourteen-year-old boy whose application for membership in the gymnasium includes the statement that he is "learning letters" (μανθάνων γράμματα). Here the term "letters" probably means literature rather than the ABCs, and the attainment is mentioned because it serves to enhance the boy's status. Yet such an attainment was certainly not required for membership in the gymnasium; its absence would therefore not have involved a disability or stigma for other members of the gymnasial class.

In all these examples--from the simple declaration of illiteracy on a contract through the polemics of Jerome--the meaning of "literacy" and "illiteracy," of "knowing" and "not knowing letters," and of the term "letters" itself varies from context to context. The meaning of the terms depends not only upon specific substantive criteria--exactly how well one can read, precisely how well one can write--but also upon more fluid and less tangible considerations: the setting in which the speaker uses the terms; the expectations of the circles with which the speaker is familiar; and (most clearly in Jerome's case) how far self-esteem and one's claim on the respect of others depend on literary sophis-

tication.

Jerome's case, in fact, brings us to our second topic: the place of literacy in the competition for esteem among the elite. Jerome's readiness to turn his enemy's supposed "illiteracy" against him is not unusual; or rather, it is unusual only in that Christians--as Jerome himself well knew--were not supposed to speak that way about one another. But that way of speaking, and the values implied thereby, were all but unavoidable for those who had received their education in the scholae liberales, the "liberal schools," of grammar and rhetoric.

We must understand, first, that the schools of grammar and rhetoric were markedly exclusive in their social organization. It is necessary here to think not of a single, integrated track of primary and secondary schools, like the system known in the United States and other industrialized countries today, but of different types of schools serving different segments of the population. The population at large, massively illiterate, was served (however ill) by the "schools of letters" (γραμματοδιδασκαλεῖα, ludi litterarii), institutions of low prestige that generally provided only basic, utilitarian literacy. But those who had access to the "liberal schools" of grammar and rhetoric would receive their basic instruction at home or from teachers assigned to impart the first elements in the grammarian's school; they would thus meet the grammarian as their first teacher. The typical product of the schools of liberal letters was therefore insulated from the lower orders, just as teachers of liberal letters were distinguished by their higher fees and their legal privileges from the common "teacher of letters".

This form of organization is not in itself peculiar to late antiquity, the product of a sudden aristocratization of the literary culture; it stands revealed in sources ranging from the first through the sixth centuries, and is attributable to several obvious factors. First, the higher fees that the gram-

marian and rhetorician charged, the additional largesse they traditionally received on special occasions, the allowances young men would need if they traveled to centers of study, and the long years tht a full literary education required--all these required surplus wealth. As Lactantius remarked, instead of giving thanks for being born human, male, Greek, Athenian, and a contemporary of Socrates, Plato should have given thanks that he was born talented, teachable, "and with the resources to be liberally educated". Few categories in the population had resources on the scale sufficient to bear the expenses and allow their sons to be idle so long: government functionaries; teachers and members of other liberal professions (largely advocates); men of the curial order and other urban worthies of no visible occupation; some Christian bishops and presbyters; and of course the old senatorial aristocracy in the West.

While some from among these categories--teachers, imperial bureaucrats, advocates--could count on salaries, fees, or gifts, the common denominator was still land: thus, Jerome presumes that a man momentarily short of funds to pay a teacher's fee would give a landowner's excuses--crops damaged by hail or drought, the profits eaten up by taxes. By no means could all landowners manage easily: although his father was a town councilor of middling means with an estate, St. Augustine's education was a close thing, begun in the lower-status school of letters and continued only through the extraordinary efforts of his father and the timely beneficence of a family connection.

The outlook for the lower orders was still less promising: very few students from levels of society lower than those already mentioned are known to have entered the schools of liberal letters. In addition, access to these schools was made still more difficult by their rather sparse geographical distribution. The schools of grammar and rhetoric were largely confined to the larger towns. A rough measure of that fact is provided by the following detail: of the one hundred-odd <u>grammatici</u> we can identify and place from the mid-third

through the mid-sixth centuries, all taught in spots that emerged as episcopal sees at some time during this period. To be sure, we should not assume that every see had a grammarian's school; nor were all bishops' towns grand places (the grammatici in fact are mostly found in the larger sees). Such places did, however, tend to be the centers of gravity in the secular as well as the spiritual lives of their regions. To that extent--and because, unlike the Christian bishop, they were not concerned to extend their message and influence into the hinterland--the liberal teachers in late antiquity still participated in the ancient division between town and country.

The social and geographic exclusiveness of the literary culture, the difficulty of its access, had several important consequences, one of which is most relevant to our theme: the recurrence of "letters" (that is, liberal letters) or the like as one of the three or four most important marks of status--what Paulinus of Nola means when he refers to "office, letters, and family background" (honos, litterae, domus) as the "tokens of prestige in the world," or what Jerome has in mind when he speaks of the "noble man, fluent of speech, wealthy", a vivid figure flanked by an "accompaniment of the powerful", set off against the backdrop of the "mob." At one extreme, literary attainments would provide eminence at the tomb, if nowhere else, a fact that accounts for the scores of funeral inscriptions that record the attainments of children or youths, as pathetic reminders of dignity achieved and promise cut short. At the other extreme, one's literary culture followed one through life, to be included regularly, for example, on inscriptions honoring men who had gone on to hold the highest offices of state. On such occasions "letters" (or "eloquence") are regularly joined with other virtues such men might claim, like iustitia and integritas.

The phrase "other virtues" is used advisedly here: the union of "letters" with "justice" and "integrity" should not surprise, for the literary culture was

itself a guarantee of virtue; its acquisition was a sign that one possessed the discipline, the diligence, and the appetite for toil that marked a man fit to share in the burden of government. Doctrina presumed mores, to be a scholar presumed that one was the right sort of person, a gentleman. "Letters" validated claims to status, both moral status and social status--although the two were hardly separate in the eyes of the liberally educated man: the learned were, simply, the good; the uneducated were the inertes, the "crude and slothful."

This brings us to our third and final topic. The educated elite's complacent identification of their own literacy with virtue, and of ignorance with depravity, could not help but catch the attention of another group for whom literacy raised fundamental questions: I refer, of course, to the Christians, whose culture had a paradox of literacy at its core, as a religion of The Book founded, in the words of the apostle, by "illiterates and laymen." That the Christian Fathers offered various criticisms of the classical literary culture is well known. Perhaps less well known is the fact that they criticized the specifically "pagan" content of the literature much less often than the social attitudes and values--the pride, the competitiveness, the divisiveness--that were engendered by (as Augustine put it) "those letters that the slaves of diverse passions call 'liberal.'"

Where elite literacy was not simply an elaboration of aesthetic principles but a distinguishing possession of a small yet extraordinarily influential segment of society, how was one to understand the relation between the "letters" of the few and the grace of God available to all? What did "letters" have to do with spiritual understanding? How did the rules and forms of elite literacy meet the real needs of men, or further their good relations with one another in this world and their preparations for life in the next? Such questions had their roots in the canonical reminder that Peter and John were "illiterates and laymen" (Acts 4.13) and in Paul's claim to be "ignorant in speech, but not in

understanding" (2 Cor. 11.6). These men provided Christians with the powerful model of the illiterate or ill-educated apostle as charismatic teacher, whose truth owed nothing to the conventions and institutions of men. But the litterati of the non-Christian world rejected that truth and ridiculed the uncouth language in which it was transmitted.

In apologetics the Christians could meet that contempt readily enough with the claim that such men saw only surfaces. The culture of the litterati was a culture of the tongue, not of the heart: it invested everything in trappings meant to increase prestige among men in a world rotten with false values; it cared nothing for the inner truth of Grace that bound a man to God and gave a stable center to his life. That was a satisfactory claim to make as long as the litterati were, for the most part, outside the Church. But when, from the late third century onward, more and more Christians came to speak with the tongue of the elite culture, old answers were no longer quite so easily applied. It becomes possible to trace different answers in the two halves of the empire, as the literary culture comes to be regarded less as a divisive force in the East, while remaining an important symbol of fundamental differences in the West.

By the early fourth century most Christians of the East were prepared to look out on the world as a place with which they had much in common; the Church in the West, by contrast, was more inward-turning, still regarding itself as a small gathering of the elect, an alien body in a dangerous environment. These divergent positions had underpinnings both intellectual and social. The messages of Tertullian and Origen still reached receptive audiences, but the two men spoke with very different voices. To an educated Christian of the East, the stringent puritanism of Tertullian would have seemed strangely backward. It was at best an unsophisticated notion that classical culture in all its forms was a poison, or that education in the traditional schools, though perhaps necessary for want of an alternative, was nevertheless a regrettable and evil necessity;

at worst, the view revealed a disquieting lack of confidence in Christian intelligence and judgment. The stark antitheses implied in Tertullian's question, "What has Athens to do with Jerusalem?", could easily be resolved along the lines Origen laid down: Athens was part of Jerusalem's perfection--in itself imperfect or immature, no doubt, with a mixture of truth and falsehood that required discrimination, but an inseparable, in fact desirable, part nonetheless. Origen had banished the choice of either / or by telling the educated Christian that he occupied the enviable position of the connoisseur: with untroubled superiority he could surely and subtly separate the true from the false, the important from the inconsequential.

This sense of sophisticated superiority was further cushioned by the social experience of Christians in the East. Christianity there had not only spread more quickly than in the West, but it stood in a different relation to the organization of urban life. The Christian community closely followed the continuum of social gradations in the towns. The educated bishop who emerged from the local upper classes could justifiably claim a position among his city's social and cultural elite; as the leader of an important group that cut across class lines within the town, he could take his place as a force to be reckoned with, alongside--and in the manner of--the factional leaders of the old town councils. But in the West, the social structure was surmounted by the class of great landowners, especially among the old senatorial aristocracy, a group of men who had no exact counterpart in the East and with whom few Western bishops could associate as social or cultural equals. Such men were raised up by their wealth, education, and birth, and loomed over the towns. Late in coming into the Church, they provided a continuing reminder of the worldly authority and prestige of the culture that lay outside. They were not easily domesticated when they came in: their power required gingerly treatment on the part of any bishop who wished to coax and bend them to his purposes; the status and self-assurance

they derived from their wealth and education made them potential competitors of men who had risen throught he ranks of the Church.

The components of worldly and spiritual standing thus were at variance longer in the West; at the same time, other lines of division were superimposed. The early development of vernacular Christianity in the East meant that religious boundaries did not remain congruent with linguistic boundaries; in the West, where there was no comparable development, Latin provided the single path of access to the vital texts. Hence, the kind of Latin one should use remained a conspicuous sticking point: in many minds, the polished speech of the few continued to be incompatible with the spiritual understanding of the many. In the East, where the question of language was more diffuse, solutions were more numerous: a readiness to hear a holy man, for instance, expound the Word of God in a Graeco-Syriac patois allowed one to turn aside from one's own highly cultivated speech--to treat it as something detachable, neutral, and so taken for granted--in a way unknown in the West. In part, the Eastern vernaculars added one more cushion against self-consciousness, a way of avoiding the problems framed in the language of either / or.

A further, decisive factor was the persistence of political unity in the East, which both sheltered urban Christianity and kept it in check, drawing it into the structure of civilian life and competing institutions with a web of familial, social, and political relations. But the sudden fragmentation of the western empire in the early fifth century tore apart that structure and weakened its constraints: as a result, the Church was isolated yet powerful, left to provide the leaders of society with new careers and the institutions on which to base them. Life in the West did not suffer collapse so much as compression. Communities were thrown back on their own resources, which were frequently identical with the resources--the men, money, and culture--that the local bishop could mobilize. The problem of leadership, put thus sharply, would be solved

differently according to the individual bishops' backgrounds and angles of vision--including their vision of "letters," and the place of "letters" in the world of men and the work of God.

It is not possible, within the scope of this paper, to trace these developments in any detail. I do hope, however, that I have been able to convey some of the interest that the topic of literacy in late antiquity has to offer. It is a rich field for investigation; and as I noted at the outset, the work has really just begun.